

The Weight of Other People's Hearts

Est

"I want the wind to carry me, far away from here."

The week had passed in a blur of creative purpose and unexpected healing. Before I even realized it, Friday had arrived—a full five days since my Sunday reset, five days of work and routine and the particular rhythm of someone who was actively, consciously rebuilding their life from the ground up. The makeup campaign had consumed most of my waking hours, each shooting day bringing new setups, new challenges, new opportunities to lose myself in the kind of creative work that reminded me why I'd fallen in love with photography in the first place. But the work wasn't the only thing that had made the week fly by.

Thanks to Nut and the company's resources, I'd been able to see the therapist—Dr. Siriporn, the woman whose office I'd walked into on Wednesday afternoon with my heart pounding and my palms sweating, convinced I was about to spend an hour explaining the disaster that was William Jakrapatr.

It hadn't gone that way at all.

Just one session—my first ever—scheduled mid-week in a nondescript office building that smelled like lavender and professionalism. The waiting room had been small and beige, decorated with the kind of inoffensive art that was designed to soothe without making any particular statement. Magazines on a low table. Soft music playing from hidden speakers. The particular quiet of a space designed for people who were about to expose their vulnerabilities. I'd sat there for fifteen minutes before my appointment, hands folded in my lap, wondering what I was going to say. I'd rehearsed it in my head—the story of William, the pattern of choosing unavailable people, the way I kept expecting different results from identical situations. That's what I needed to talk about. That's why I was there.

Right?

The session had surprised me. I'd walked in prepared to talk about William. About the obsession, the breakdown, the pattern of falling for unavailable people and expecting them to save me. That was the presenting problem, after all. That was the thing that had finally driven me to ask for help, the crisis that had shown me I couldn't keep living this way.

But when Dr. Siriporn had asked where I wanted to start, something else had emerged.

"What brings you here today?"

And I'd opened my mouth to talk about William. Instead, I talked about my father.

"My father," I'd heard myself say, the words coming out before I could second-guess them. "I want to talk about my father."

For almost an hour, I'd talked about things I'd spent years trying to forget. My father's harsh and cold hand—the way it had felt when it connected with my face or my shoulder, not often enough to call it regular abuse, but often enough to teach me that love could turn to violence without warning. The complete lack of interest he'd shown in anything I did, anything I wanted, anything I dreamed about. The way he'd looked at me sometimes, with a coldness in his eyes that suggested I was a disappointment he couldn't quite articulate—a burden he'd never asked for and didn't know how to bear.

"He never showed interest in my life," I'd told Dr. Siriporn, the words spilling out in a rush I couldn't stop. "Not my school, not my friends, not my hobbies. When I discovered photography, when I realized it was something I was actually good at—he didn't care. Didn't ask to see my work. Didn't acknowledge that I'd found something that mattered to me. I was just... there. Existing in his house, eating his food, taking up space he would have preferred to have for himself."

The words came out before I could stop them—stories I hadn't told anyone in years, memories I'd pushed so far down I'd almost forgotten they existed. His harsh and cold hand, both literally and figuratively. The criticism that was never quite abuse but never quite acceptable either. The little interest he showed in anything I did, unless it reflected poorly on him. I told her about the time I'd won a photography prize in high school—a small competition, nothing major, but I'd been so proud. I'd brought the certificate home, eager to show him, to finally earn some kind of approval. He'd glanced at it, grunted something noncommittal, and gone back to reading his newspaper.

That was the moment I'd learned that nothing I did would ever be enough.

I told her about the silence at the dinner table. The way he'd correct my posture, my speech, my choices without ever explaining why they were wrong. The understanding, absorbed through years of subtle signals, that I was a disappointment simply by existing.

And I told her about the day he'd found out I was gay.

I remembered them with perfect clarity, even now, years later. The way his face had gone cold, closed off, like a door slamming shut. The way my mother had stood in the doorway, saying nothing, doing nothing, choosing his side through her silence.

I'd left that night with whatever I could fit in a backpack. I'd never gone back.

Dr. Siriporn had listened without interrupting, her expression open and attentive. "And your mother?" she'd asked gently.

My mother.

I'd thought I'd made peace with her. Had convinced myself, over years of distance and careful rationalization, that her particular brand of harm was less significant than my father's. After all, she'd never raised a hand to me. She'd fed me, clothed me, kept me physically safe. She'd been proud to have a son—she'd told me so, multiple times, in front of aunts and uncles and neighbors who nodded approvingly. But as I sat in that comfortable office, with Dr. Siriporn's patient attention creating space for honesty I'd never allowed myself, I realized how much I'd been minimizing.

A woman who only thought about appearances. Who had been proud to have a son—in theory, in concept—but had spent my entire childhood redirecting me, reshaping me, trying to mold me into something that wouldn't embarrass her in front of her friends and colleagues. I told the therapist about the endless corrections. "Don't hold your hands like that, Est—what will people think?" "Don't wear that color, it makes you look sickly." "Don't speak too loudly, too softly, too much, too little." Every choice I made filtered through the lens of what was "viable" for her, what would reflect well, what would maintain the image she'd constructed of the perfect family.

I told her about the way my mother would parade me at social events like a prize, introducing me to her friends with practiced pride while simultaneously pinching my arm to remind me to stand straighter, smile wider, be better. The cognitive dissonance of being both displayed and diminished. And I told her about the silence after my father kicked me out.

My mother had my number. She could have called. Could have texted. Could have done anything to indicate that I still existed in her world, that her son was still her son regardless of what her husband had declared. She chose the image instead. She chose the marriage. She chose to pretend I'd never existed rather than face the social complications of a gay son who'd been disowned.

"She cared about appearances," I said slowly, each word feeling like a confession being dragged up from somewhere deep. "She was proud to have a son—proud in the way you're proud of a nice house or an expensive car. Something that reflected well on her. Something that made the neighbors say the right things."

I paused, gathering my thoughts. "But the actual me—who I was inside, what I wanted, what I dreamed about—that never mattered. What mattered was what people would think. What the extended family would say. Whether I was making choices that would embarrass her in front of her friends."

I told Dr. Siriporn about the constant redirection. The way my mother had steered every conversation, every decision, every possibility toward what she called "viable options." Careers that would bring prestige. Relationships that would look

appropriate from the outside. Hobbies that wouldn't raise eyebrows or invite gossip.

Photography had been acceptable only because it could be spun as a respectable profession. I'd been lucky in that regard—if I'd wanted to paint, or write poetry, or pursue anything that couldn't be easily explained at dinner parties, I knew instinctively that she would have found ways to discourage it. Would have redirected and redirected until I gave up and chose something more suitable.

"She spent my entire childhood," I said, "trying to make me take only the options that were viable for her. Actions and words that wouldn't embarrass her. She never asked what I wanted—not once, in eighteen years of living under her roof. Every decision was about managing perception. About making sure the family looked good to everyone who was watching."

"And when you told her about your sexuality?" Dr. Siriporn had asked.

"She didn't say anything," I admitted, my voice going quiet. "Not to my face. She just... withdrew. Got quieter around me. Started looking at me differently, like I'd become someone she didn't recognize—or worse, someone she was ashamed of." I'd stopped then, my throat closing up with the memory.

"Take your time." Dr. Siriporn said.

"And then my father found out. And he kicked me out. And she—" I had to force the words past the lump in my throat. "She didn't stop him. Didn't argue. Didn't try to protect me. She just stood there and let it happen, because the alternative was having a gay son who embarrassed her. Who made the neighbors whisper. Who disrupted the careful image she'd spent decades constructing."

The session had continued from there—more questions, more revelations, more careful examination of patterns I'd spent years refusing to acknowledge. By the time I left, I was exhausted in a way that felt both terrible and necessary. Like I'd had a tooth pulled—painful, but the source of the infection was finally being addressed.

By the time I finished talking, the session was almost over.

"That was a lot to share," Dr. Siriporn said gently. "How are you feeling?"

I'd thought about it. Really considered the question rather than offering an automatic fine. "Lighter," I'd said finally. "Like I put down a bag I'd been carrying so long I forgot it was there."

She'd nodded, something like understanding in her expression. "That's often how it works. We come in thinking we know what we need to address, and the real issues have been waiting for their chance to be heard."

"What about William?" I'd asked. "The reason I thought I needed therapy in the first place?"

"We'll get there," she'd said. "But sometimes the patterns we want to understand have roots that go much deeper than we realize. It sounds like there might be some connections between how you learned to relate to your parents and how you relate to romantic partners now."

The words had sat with me long after the session ended.

Connections. Of course there were connections. My father had taught me that love was conditional and easily withdrawn. My mother had taught me that my value was determined by others' opinions. Was it any wonder I kept choosing people who couldn't love me back?

"You're doing important work," Dr. Siriporn had said as I gathered my things to leave. "This isn't easy, and it won't be quick. But understanding the patterns that shaped you is the first step toward choosing different patterns going forward."

I'd nodded, not quite trusting my voice.

"Same time next week?"

"Yes." I'd managed. "Same time next week."

I'd walked home from that session feeling like something had shifted inside me—not fixed, not healed, but moved. A piece of furniture that had been blocking a doorway for years, finally pushed aside to reveal what lay beyond.

The meeting at the company had been a welcome distraction from the emotional weight I was still carrying. I'd arrived early, finding my way to the third-floor conference room where the creative team was gathering. Coffee and pastries were spread across a side table, and the energy in the space was professional but warm—people greeting each other, catching up on projects, settling into chairs around the long table.

The morning at the company was productive. I'd spent several hours in meetings, being introduced to the other photographers and support staff who'd be working on the makeup campaign. The conference room was bright and professional, with a long table surrounded by comfortable chairs and walls covered in examples of past campaigns—beautiful images that represented what this company was capable of producing.

There were four photographers now, down from the original five. Me filling the gap left by the pregnant photographer who'd had to step back. The others were friendly but professional. They asked questions about my background, my style, my approach to different challenges. I answered honestly, trying not to oversell or undersell myself. By the end of the meeting, I felt like I was actually part of something—not just a freelancer brought in to fill a gap, but a member of a team.

Nut had assembled everyone involved in the makeup campaign: He walked us through the remaining schedule—shooting days broken down by look, by model, by location. The studio work was progressing well, but there was still the outdoor phase to consider. Once Songkran preparations got closer, we'd be capturing the festival energy in actual public settings.

"We're glad to have you," Nut said as the meeting wrapped up, clapping me on the shoulder with his characteristic enthusiasm. "Fresh perspectives are always valuable." Fresh perspectives. The words echoed what he'd said during the studio tour, and I found myself believing them a little more this time.

By the time we wrapped up, I felt energized in a way that had nothing to do with caffeine. This was what I'd wanted—real creative work, collaborative rather than solitary, part of something larger than any individual contribution. The kind of photography career I'd dreamed about when I was a kid taking pictures with my first borrowed camera. I said goodbye to a few colleagues and headed out, already thinking about my next stop.

The bus to Ink & Ashes was familiar.

I sat by the window, watching the city scroll past—the same shops and restaurants and apartment buildings I'd seen a hundred times, but somehow different today. Brighter, maybe. More detailed. Like I was actually seeing them instead of just registering their existence. The makeup campaign meeting had left me energized, buzzing with the particular satisfaction of being part of something larger. But I also needed the grounding that came from visiting Tui's studio. The familiar space, the familiar faces, the reminder that my life wasn't only about work.

When I arrived at the studio, something was wrong. I could feel it the moment I pushed open the door, the bell chiming its usual greeting. The energy in the space was off—heavy, tense, charged with something I couldn't immediately identify.

Tui and Hong were there, standing near the counter. They seemed serious in a way I rarely saw from either of them—Hong's usual dry humor absent from his expression, Tui's characteristic warmth replaced by something more guarded. Tension. Conflict. Something had happened, and whatever it was, it had left both of them wound tight. From the back room, I could hear the familiar buzz of a tattoo machine—steady and professional, a counterpoint to the charged atmosphere in the front of the shop. Yuki must still be working, I thought. Finishing up with a client, unaware of or deliberately ignoring whatever drama was unfolding out here.

"It's clear he was there." Hong was saying, his voice more serious than I'd heard it in weeks. There was an edge to his words, frustration bleeding through his usual careful composure.

I paused just inside the doorway, sensing I'd walked into the middle of something

significant.

"Yuki said he was going to deliver the flowers himself," Hong continued, his arms crossed over his chest in that defensive posture people adopted when they were trying to contain strong emotions. "But then he came back crying, saying he had to leave and asking her to deliver them instead."

I listened silently, lowering my backpack onto the leather sofa by the window. The familiar piece of furniture accepted my bag with its usual soft give, but I didn't sit down. The atmosphere demanded attention.

"We don't know, Hong," Tui replied, his voice carefully controlled—the voice of someone trying not to escalate a situation that was already close to boiling over. He was standing behind the counter, his hands flat on the surface like he was bracing himself.

"He probably heard us, that's why he didn't come in." Hong's frustration was palpable now, radiating off him in waves. "That's why he didn't come in. He was right outside the door, and he heard what we were saying, and—I told you to be more careful about what you say when—"

"You're just making things worse," Tui interrupted, his own voice rising slightly now. "You don't know that for certain. You're assuming—"

"I'm making things worse?" Hong's voice rose slightly, incredulity coloring his tone. "I'm not the one who's been dancing around his feelings for months while everyone else has to watch the slow-motion disaster unfold—" "You're making things worse!" Hong shot back, the words sharp enough to cut. "You're the one who said those things! You're the one who's been pushing him away for months, pretending you don't feel what you obviously feel—"

"Hong—"

"—and now he probably thinks you actually believe he's just some kid who isn't worth your time!"

I stood there watching, not knowing what was happening but understanding enough to stay quiet. The tension between them was thick, charged with something that went beyond a normal disagreement. This was about something—or someone—important.

Then Hong grabbed his things.

His backpack was already on his shoulder, his jacket clutched in one hand, his body oriented toward the door in the universal language of someone who was done with this conversation.

"You're just acting like a fool," he said, and the words landed like stones—heavy,

deliberate, meant to wound because nothing else seemed to be getting through. "You've been acting like a fool for months, and everyone can see it except you."

Tui moved toward him, reaching out as if to stop him from leaving. "Hong, wait—can we just talk about this—" But Hong broke free, sidestepping the outstretched hand with a dancer's grace, his body flowing around the obstacle without losing momentum.

"I'm going to university." His voice was sharp, controlled, but I could hear the hurt underneath—the particular pain of watching someone you cared about make choices you couldn't understand. "Get your head straight, you idiot."

He turned then, finally seeming to notice me standing there like an awkward bystander in someone else's drama. His expression shifted—not quite a smile, but an acknowledgment that I existed, that he was aware of my presence even in the midst of his anger.

"Hello and goodbye, Est." His voice was almost normal, almost casual, as if we were just passing in the street. "Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

And then he was gone.

The bell above the door rang as he left, its cheerful chime jarringly inappropriate for the moment. I watched through the window as his silver hair caught the afternoon light, then disappeared around the corner.

The studio felt emptier without him. Quieter. The hum of Yuki's tattoo machine from the back room suddenly seemed very loud. Tui stood where Hong had left him, his hand still half-extended, his face a complicated mix of emotions I couldn't quite read. Frustration. Guilt. Something that looked almost like grief.

"Hey." Tui's greeting was awkward, uncertain—nothing like his usual easy confidence. He seemed smaller somehow, diminished by the confrontation that had just ended. He sank into the hall chair, his shoulders slumping, the exhaustion visible in every line of his body.

"Hey." I replied, still standing by the window where I'd frozen during the argument.

"So?" I asked finally, moving to sit on the leather sofa I'd set my bag on. "What happened?"

Tui was quiet for a moment, his eyes fixed on some point in the middle distance. Then he stood, moving toward the small kitchen area in the corner of the reception space.

"Coffee?" he asked, his back to me.

"Sure."

The story came out in pieces. Tui moved as he talked, unable to stay still—getting up to make coffee, adjusting things on the counter, showing me the flowers that had apparently been at the center of whatever had just occurred.

They were beautiful.

Bright, beautiful orange blooms arranged with obvious care, wrapped in paper that matched their warmth. They were like captured sunshine, vibrant and alive, the kind of gift that spoke of intention and emotion. Someone had chosen these flowers specifically, had arranged them with attention to color and form and meaning.

"They're beautiful." I said.

"Yeah." Tui's voice was flat, heavy. "They are."

The coffee finished brewing. He poured two cups and carried them to the small table near the window, setting them down before dropping into a chair. I followed, settling into the seat across from him.

"Lego brought these." Tui said, his voice carefully neutral in a way that suggested the neutrality was costing him something.

Lego. The name I'd been hearing for months now—in Hong's comments, in Tui's careful deflections, in the air around them whenever the flower shop across the street was mentioned.

"He was going to deliver them himself," Tui continued, pouring coffee into two mugs with mechanical precision. "He came to the door, I think, but then... he left. Gave them to Yuki instead and asked her to bring them in. He was crying."

The pieces started clicking into place. The tension between Tui and Hong. The argument I'd just witnessed. The crying boy who couldn't bring himself to walk through the door.

"And Hong thinks..." I started.

"Hong thinks he overheard us." Tui finally met my eyes, and I saw something vulnerable there—something raw and exposed. "We were talking—me and Hong—about Lego. About how I feel about him. About why I keep... why I keep pushing him away."

"What did you say?"

The question hung in the air between us.

"I called him a kid." The words came out heavy, weighted with regret. "Not to his face—just when I was talking to Hong. I said he was too young. That I couldn't—that I shouldn't feel what I feel about him because he's barely nineteen and I'm twenty-

three and I've already lived through things that would..." He trailed off, running a hand through his hair.

"Things that would what?" I prompted gently.

"Things that would destroy someone that innocent."

I took a sip of my coffee, giving myself time to process what I was hearing. The situation was complicated—more complicated than I'd realized when I'd walked through that door. This wasn't just about Tui being oblivious to his own feelings, or even about him being afraid of commitment. This was about something deeper. Something that had roots in his past that I was only beginning to understand.

"After Yuki told me what happened. I sent Lego a message. Tried to explain, to..." Tui said, as if reading my thoughts.

"And?"

"He ignored it." The pain in Tui's voice was palpable. "Hong is right. I hurt him. I said those things, and he heard them, and now..."

I set down my coffee cup and looked at him directly. "You're being a fool." I said.

The silence stretched between us. I thought about what Hong had said before leaving. Get your head straight, you idiot. The words had been harsh, but they'd also sounded like they came from a place of genuine frustration—the kind that built up when you watched someone you cared about make the same mistake over and over.

He was quiet for a long moment, absorbing the criticism. "I know," he said finally. His voice was softer now, stripped of the defensive edge I'd expected. "I know I'm being... I'm trying to work on it. With my therapist."

"He's right," Tui said finally. "Hong's right. About all of it." Tui set down his coffee mug with careful precision, centering it exactly on the small table. A delaying tactic, I recognized—the gesture of someone gathering courage. "I know what I've been doing," he said, his voice quieter now. More honest. "Keeping Lego at arm's length. Pretending I don't feel what I feel. Making up reasons why it would never work, why I shouldn't even try."

"And what do you feel?"

The question hung in the air between us.

Tui looked at me directly, his dark eyes meeting mine with an intensity that surprised me. "You know, don't you? You and Hong both. You've seen it."

I thought about the months of observation. The way Tui's expression changed

whenever Lego's name was mentioned. The careful way he talked about the flower shop across the street, never quite acknowledging why it mattered so much. The obvious tension that everyone could see except, apparently, the two people at the center of it.

"The crush?" I said carefully. "On Lego?"

Tui winced, like the word caused physical pain. "Is it that obvious?"

"To everyone except you, apparently."

A sound escaped him—something between a laugh and a groan. "That's what Hong keeps saying. He's been on my case for months, telling me to do something about it, to stop dancing around and just... talk to him. Be honest. Take a risk."

"Why don't you?" The question was simple, but I could see it land like something heavy. Tui's shoulders tensed, his jaw tightening, all the easy confidence he usually wore falling away to reveal something more fragile underneath.

"Because I'm a fool." he said quietly. "Just like Hong said."

"What happened when I was a teenager," Tui continued slowly, choosing each word with care, "Isn't my fault. I know that now. My therapist has helped me understand that—really understand it, not just intellectually but emotionally." He paused, his jaw tightening. "But for a long time, I believed... I believed that if I didn't love anyone romantically, that would save them. That if I just kept everyone at a distance, I wouldn't hurt them the way I was hurt. I wouldn't become..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"The person who hurt you." I said quietly.

"Yeah."

The word hung in the air between us, heavy with implication.

"That's not how it works," I said carefully. "Being hurt doesn't make you an abuser. You know that, right?"

"I know it intellectually." Tui picked up his coffee cup, wrapping both hands around it as if seeking warmth. "My therapist has told me a hundred times. I've read the research. I understand, on a logical level, that what happened to me doesn't determine what I'll do to others. That patterns can be broken. That I'm not destined to repeat the harm that was done to me."

"But?"

"But knowing something in your head and believing it in your heart—those are different things." He looked at me with an honesty that felt almost painful. "I'm

trying. I really am. But when I'm too close to him—when I'm in the same room with Lego, breathing the same air, feeling what I feel—it's like I'm burning up. Like there's too much happening inside me and I don't know how to contain it. How to control it."

I'd suspected for months that Tui had feelings for Lego. Hong and I had discussed it more than once—the way Tui's eyes followed Lego when he was in the room, the way his whole demeanor shifted when the flower-obsessed boy was nearby. It had been obvious to everyone except, apparently, the two people most directly involved.

"I convinced myself it was wisdom. Self-protection. The mature choice. But really..."

"Really it was fear."

"Yes." The admission seemed to cost him something. "Fear dressed up as logic. Avoidance disguised as growth."

I thought about my own patterns—the way I kept choosing unavailable people, the way I set myself up for heartbreak and then acted surprised when it arrived. Different strategy, maybe, but the same root cause: trying to control something that couldn't be controlled, trying to protect yourself from pain by making choices that guaranteed it.

"And then Lego appeared." I said.

Tui nodded slowly. "About eight months ago, and he started coming in—to say hi, to bring tea, to ask about the art on the walls. He was just... sunshine. This genuine warmth that I'd forgotten existed. No agenda, no performance, just kindness."

But I hadn't understood the depth of it. Hadn't realized that Tui's denial wasn't just obliviousness or fear of commitment, but something rooted in genuine trauma. Genuine terror that caring for someone could transform into hurting them.

"That burning feeling," I said slowly, trying to find the right words. "That's not danger. That's just... love. Intense, overwhelming, scary love. The kind that makes you feel out of control because you can't predict it or manage it the way you want to."

"I don't like feeling out of control."

"Nobody does. But sometimes that's what it takes. To let someone in. To be vulnerable. To risk getting hurt—or risking hurting someone else—because the alternative is staying safe and alone, and that's..." I trailed off, realizing that I was speaking from my own experience now. From the things Dr. Siriporn and I had started to unpack. From the patterns I was learning to see in myself. "The alternative is worse," I finished. "Even when it doesn't feel that way."

Tui was quiet for a long time.

The tattoo machine had stopped buzzing at some point during our conversation. I heard footsteps, and a moment later, Yuki appeared in the doorway leading to the back room. She was still in her work clothes, her traditional sleeve visible beneath a simple black top, her expression carefully neutral as she took in the atmosphere.

"Everything okay out here?" she said, her eyes moving between us.

"Fine," Tui said, his voice only slightly strained. "Just... processing."

I stayed with him for a few hours. The conversation moved on from Lego—or rather, orbited around him without addressing him directly. We talked about work, about the studio, about the exhibition Hong would be participating in next month. We talked about my new project, the makeup campaign, the particular satisfaction of being part of a real team again.

We talked about therapy—his and mine. The strange relief of saying things out loud that you'd only ever thought in the privacy of your own head. The way understanding something intellectually was just the beginning; the real work was learning to feel it, to believe it, to let it change the patterns carved into you by years of experience.

When Yuki finished—I waved goodbye from across the room. I didn't want to interrupt as she cleaned up her station and prepared for whoever was next on the schedule.

The afternoon had stretched into early evening by the time I gathered my things to leave. "Talk to him." I said to Tui as I headed for the door. "Or don't. But at least stop lying to yourself about what you want."

He didn't respond verbally, but something in his expression suggested the words had landed where they needed to. The bell chimed as I left, its sound different now—softer, more final, marking the end of a conversation that had covered more ground than I'd expected when I walked in.

I left the shop and walked. Not toward home—not yet. I needed to process, to think, to let the events of the afternoon settle into some kind of order. The streets around Ink & Ashes had become familiar over the months of visiting, but today I found myself paying more attention to the details I usually overlooked.

The way the light fell between buildings, creating pockets of shadow and warmth. The sounds of the city—traffic and voices and music spilling from open doorways, the particular soundtrack of Bangkok in the late afternoon. The smells of street food and exhaust and flowers from a cart on the corner. I thought about Tui and his fear. About Lego and his flowers and his tears. About Hong's frustration—the sharp edges of someone who cared too much watching someone else make avoidable mistakes.

I thought about my own patterns. The therapy session from earlier in the week and the unexpected direction it had taken. The connections Dr. Siriwan had hinted at between my childhood wounds and my adult choices. Was I really so different from Tui? He hid behind logic and rules, telling himself he was protecting others when really he was protecting himself. I threw myself at unavailable people, setting up situations where heartbreak was inevitable, maybe because some part of me believed that's all I deserved.

Different strategies. Same fear underneath.

The bus stop was right there.

I could see it from where I stood on the sidewalk outside Ink & Ashes, the familiar sign with its route numbers and schedules, the small shelter where I'd waited dozens of times before. I could stand on the curb, check the schedule on my phone, let the familiar rhythm of public transit carry me back to the safety of my clean, quiet apartment.

It would have been the easy choice. The choice that the version of me from two weeks ago would have made without hesitation—retreat to solitude, close the door, disappear into the comfortable numbness of isolation. But I wasn't that version of myself anymore. Or maybe I was still him, but I was also becoming someone else. Someone who made different choices, even when the old patterns pulled at me like gravity. The choice that aligned with everything Dr. Siriporn and I had discussed about protecting my energy, about not putting myself in situations that might trigger old patterns.

My eyes kept drifting across the street. To the flower shop. It sat there on the corner, Through the glass, I could see green—so much green, cascading from shelves and hanging from the ceiling, spilling out of buckets onto the floor. It looked like a tiny jungle had taken root in the middle of the city, defiant and alive amid all the concrete and exhaust. The window display had changed since the last time I'd really looked at it—spring arrangements now, soft pastels and vibrant greens, the promise of new growth after the long dry season.

I didn't know if he would even be there. But the pull was magnetic, an itch under my skin that wouldn't settle, a persistent voice in the back of my mind that said you need to do this, you need to face this, you need to close this loop before you can move forward.

I just need some plants, I told myself, the lie tasting like ash on my tongue. The apartment is too sterile. Too clean. It feels like a hotel room, or a tomb. I need something living to put in the corners, something green to break up all that empty white space.

It was a flimsy excuse, and I knew it. I'd walked past plant shops dozens of times in

the past year without feeling any urge to buy something. My apartment had been sterile for months, and I'd never cared. The sudden interest in greenery was transparent even to myself—a justification, a cover story, a way to pretend that what I was really doing wasn't what I was really doing. I wasn't going for plants. I was going because the guilt of the last few weeks was still sitting heavy in my stomach, a weight that no amount of cleaning or therapy or new job excitement had managed to dissolve. I was going because Tui and Hong weren't the only ones entangled in the mess I'd made of my life. I was going because somewhere in that flower shop was a boy who had witnessed one of the worst moments of my life, who had seen me at my most pathetic and desperate, and who deserved an apology I hadn't yet given.

I was going because I needed to face Lego. Because facing him was part of facing myself. Because the resurrection I was trying to believe in required confronting the wreckage, not just walking away from it.

I'd been so absorbed in my own pain that I'd been blind to everyone else's.

Tui and Hong weren't the only ones entangled in this mess. Lego was at the center of multiple webs—Tui's... whatever they were to each other, Hong's friend, part of the studio's extended family. And I'd stumbled through his life leaving wreckage without ever stopping to apologize.

I waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the street.

The shop was busy when I arrived. Through the glass front, I could see customers browsing the buckets of roses and carnations near the entrance, a young couple pointing at arrangements in the cooler, an older woman examining orchids by the window with the critical eye of someone who knew exactly what she wanted, every inch utilized with the careful efficiency of a business that had been operating in the same location for years, maybe decades. The buckets on the sidewalk held roses in every shade from white to deep crimson, their petals starting to close against the coming night. A chalkboard easel advertised seasonal arrangements and something about a spring sale, the handwriting cheerful and slightly uneven.

I hesitated at the door, suddenly aware of how I must look—rumpled from hours of meetings and intense conversations, my camera bag still over my shoulder, my expression probably betraying more anxiety than was socially appropriate for a simple flower purchase. But I'd come this far. And the alternative was standing on the sidewalk like a creep, staring through the window at a shop I was too nervous to enter.

The bell above the door chimed as I pushed it open—a bright, cheerful sound that felt jarringly at odds with the knot of anxiety tightening in my chest. I'd faced plenty of uncomfortable situations in my life, but there was something about this one that felt different. More personal. More important.

The smell hit me instantly. Lilies, strongest of all, their heavy sweetness almost overwhelming in the enclosed space. Beneath that, the damp earthiness of soil and moss, the green freshness of cut stems, the subtle perfume of roses and freesias and dozens of other flowers I couldn't identify. It was the smell of life, of growth, of things that bloomed and faded and bloomed again. So different from the sterile emptiness of my apartment. So different from the stale air of spaces where nothing changed.

I breathed it in and felt something in my chest loosen slightly. It was impossible to feel entirely anxious in a space that smelled this alive.

And there he was.

Lego was standing behind the main work counter, partially hidden by a barricade of buckets filled with flowers waiting to be arranged. He was working on a massive bouquet of sunflowers—William's flowers, my mind supplied unhelpfully, though I knew these were likely for a paying customer, not for the artist who had broken my heart—building something beautiful with quick, precise movements that spoke of years of muscle memory.

Every surface held flowers or plants or the accessories of the trade—ribbons and papers and cards, vases and pots and decorative stones. Buckets crowded the floor in organized rows, their contents sorted by type and color. Shelves climbed the walls, holding potted plants that cascaded down in waterfalls of green. Hanging baskets swayed gently overhead, responding to air currents from the door I'd just opened.

It was beautiful. Chaotic and colorful and completely alive in a way my sparse apartment could never be.

I stopped in the aisle, sheltered by a large fern whose fronds brushed against my shoulder, and just watched him for a moment.

He looked different. The extensions were gone. I'd seen him before with elaborate styles—braids and colors and accessories that made him look like a character from a music video—but today his hair was natural, dark brown with hints of lighter streaks where the sun had touched it. Without the artifice, he looked younger in some ways and older in others. Stripped down. Real.

He was wearing an outfit that I found myself cataloging with a photographer's attention to detail—a two-piece brown set that somehow managed to look both casual and intentional. The shorts had a subtle plaid print, the pattern catching the light in interesting ways. Long socks disappeared into heavy boots that looked too substantial for his slender legs, giving him a grounded, earthy appearance that suited the shop's aesthetic. Over it all, a black apron with his name tag pinned slightly askew, the kind of practical garment that said he was here to work.

He looked tired. That was what struck me most, now that I was really looking. There was a set to his shoulders—tension that shouldn't have been there in someone so young. A tightness in his jaw. Shadows under his eyes that spoke of sleep that hadn't been restful, or hadn't been enough. He looked like someone who'd been carrying weight for a long time, weight that wasn't his to carry but that he'd picked up anyway because that's what he did.

He looked like someone whose heart was hurting.

The bell chimed again behind me—another customer entering—and Lego looked up automatically, his professional smile ready, the expression of someone prepared to help strangers find the perfect flowers for their occasions.

Then his eyes found me.

The smile dropped. Something flickered across his face—surprise, wariness, a complicated mix of emotions I couldn't fully read. His eyes widened just a fraction, then settled into something guarded. Cautious. The expression of someone who wasn't sure what kind of interaction this was going to be.

"P'Est." His voice was carefully neutral, pitched low enough not to disturb the customers browsing nearby. Not unfriendly, exactly, but not warm either. Professional. Distant.

"Hey." I stepped forward, emerging from behind my fern shelter, and immediately felt enormous and awkward in the narrow aisle. Like a bull in a china shop, too big and clumsy for this delicate space full of fragile living things. "I... I was in the neighborhood."

The excuse sounded even flimsier out loud than it had in my head. I was in the neighborhood—technically true, since I'd just come from Ink & Ashes, but hardly an explanation for why I'd suddenly decided to visit a flower shop I'd never entered despite passing it dozens of times over the months.

"Right." Lego said.

He didn't smile. He didn't invite me closer. He didn't offer the kind of warm welcome I'd seen him giving other customers. He just stood there, a sunflower stem in one hand, his thumb rubbing absently against the cut end in what looked like a nervous habit.

The silence stretched between us, filled with the soft sounds of the shop—other customers murmuring, the snip of shears from somewhere in the back, the gentle rustle of leaves responding to air currents.

"I wanted to apologize." I blurted out.

So much for subtlety. So much for the casual browsing I'd imagined, the natural

conversation that would lead organically to the things I needed to say. The words just came out, pushed by the pressure that had been building in my chest since I walked through the door.

Lego paused. He looked at the sunflower in his hand for a moment, then set it down on the counter with deliberate care. His movements were precise, controlled—the movements of someone who was deciding how to respond.

"For what?" he asked.

Such a simple question, but it opened up a chasm of possible answers. What was I apologizing for, exactly? There was so much—so many moments, so many failures, so many ways I'd been blind to anything outside my own pain.

"For everything," I said, waving a hand vaguely to encompass the shop, the street outside, the entire complicated web of the past several months. "For the mess at William's. For the screaming. For throwing up in the hallway." The memories were still sharp, still capable of making me cringe. "For not... for not seeing you."

Lego looked at me for a long moment. His expression was difficult to read—closed, protected, the face of someone who'd learned to guard himself against potential hurt. His dark eyes moved over my face, my posture, taking in whatever they could see there. I hoped he could see the genuine regret. I hoped he understood that this wasn't a performance or an obligation, but a real acknowledgment of real harm.

Then something in his expression shifted. Softened, just slightly. "You didn't do anything wrong, P'Est." he said quietly. His voice was gentler now, though still guarded. "You fell for someone complicated. It happens."

The words were kind, but they landed like something heavier. You fell for someone complicated. Such a simple summary of something that had consumed months of my life. That had driven me to therapy. That had forced me to confront patterns I'd spent years carefully not examining.

"He hurt you, too." I said.

It wasn't a question. It was an acknowledgment. A bridge I was trying to build between his pain and mine. I'd seen it that night at the apartment—the flash of something in Lego's eyes, though I'd been too absorbed in my own obsession to really register it.

Lego flinched. It was small—barely a tremor, a tightening of his shoulders that lasted less than a second. But I saw it.

"We're working on it." he said softly.

The words were careful, chosen with precision. Working on it—not fixed, not resolved, not over. An ongoing process, like therapy, like recovery, like all the work

of becoming a different kind of person than the one your circumstances tried to make you.

"Is he..." I hesitated, hating myself for what I was about to ask. Hating that after everything—the rejection, the silence, the humiliation, the deliberately chosen reset—the first thing I wanted to know was still about William. "Is he okay?"

I hated that my heart still sped up at the thought of him. That some part of me still cared, still worried, still wanted to know that he was surviving in the world even if he was surviving without me. But caring didn't stop on command. That was something I was learning. You couldn't just decide to stop loving someone and have it be over, any more than you could decide to stop being hurt by your parents and have those wounds magically heal. The feelings lingered, fading slowly like bruises, changing colors but taking their own time to disappear.

Lego picked up the sunflower again, trimming the end with a sharp snap of his shears. The sound was decisive, final, the sound of something being cut away.

"He's painting," he said, his voice steadier now. "He's taking his meds. He's eating, mostly." He paused, adjusting the bloom in the arrangement, his focus apparently on the work but his attention clearly elsewhere. "And..." A small smile touched his lips—ghost-like, fleeting, but real. "He took the trash out."

I blinked, certain I'd misheard. "The trash?"

"It's a big deal," Lego said, and the pride in his voice was unmistakable. Gentle and fierce at the same time, the pride of someone who understood that victory came in different sizes. "For him. Getting dressed. Walking down the hallway. Carrying something. Interacting with the physical world. It's a huge step."

I nodded slowly, absorbing this information. I thought about the apartment I'd visited that terrible night. The dim lighting that had hidden most of the details—the staleness, the neglect, the particular atmosphere of a space that wasn't being cared for.

Taking out the trash. Such a small thing, for most people. Such an enormous thing, for someone whose brain made every simple task feel like climbing a mountain. For someone for whom getting out of bed was a battle, getting dressed was a war, leaving the apartment was an expedition into hostile territory.

William was trying. William was fighting. Not in any dramatic way, not with grand gestures or sweeping declarations of change. But in the small, unglamorous work of existence. Taking his medication. Making art. Eating meals. Managing the basic requirements of living when your brain was constantly trying to convince you that none of it mattered, that you didn't matter, that everything would be easier if you just stopped trying.

And he was doing it without me.

He was doing it with Lego, who stood guard over him with tired eyes and unwavering devotion. Who brought him food and checked on his medications and celebrated when he managed to take out the trash. Who loved him in the complicated, exhausting way you loved someone who was difficult to love but impossible to abandon.

I waited for the jealousy to hit. The bitter, corrosive envy that someone else got to be close to William when I'd been shut out. That Lego knew the daily details of his life when I'd been reduced to nothing, to a stranger, to someone William was actively recovering from.

But the jealousy didn't come.

Instead, I felt something unexpected. Something that might have been relief.

He wasn't drowning. He was swimming, however imperfectly, however slowly. He wasn't the disaster I'd feared, the tragedy I'd half-expected to hear about through the grapevine. He was fighting, and he was making progress, and he was surrounded by people who cared about him in ways that I never could have.

I wasn't his life raft. I wasn't his anchor. I wasn't his savior or his destroyer.

I was just someone who had passed through the storm.

"That's good," I said, and I meant it. "That's really good."

Lego nodded, something flickering in his expression—surprise, maybe, at my genuine response. He turned his attention back to the arrangement, sliding the final sunflower into place. The yellow head completed the composition, the whole bouquet now a symphony of gold and green.

"Anyway," I said, shifting my weight, trying to find my footing in this conversation that had gone deeper than I'd expected. "I'm sorry. For everything. I should have stopped William that day we first met—I should have said something, done something. I was so caught up in my own... whatever it was... that I didn't even register what was happening right in front of me."

I paused, gathering my thoughts. "And I know you and Tui and Hong are close. I know you're part of their world, and I'm..." What was I? An interloper? A satellite? Someone who'd crashed into their orbit through circumstance rather than choice? "I spend a lot of time with them too, now. With the studio, with the work, with everything. And I don't want things to be weird because I was a fool."

Lego stopped working. He set down his shears, wiped his hands on his apron, and looked at me directly for the first time since I'd walked in. His eyes were softer now. The wariness hadn't entirely receded, but it had made room for something else. A

weary kindness. The particular compassion of someone who understood foolishness, who had probably been foolish themselves, who knew that being a fool was part of being human.

The mention of Tui hung in the air—another complicated tangle of hearts and misunderstandings. I didn't say anything about it. It wasn't my place, and Lego hadn't asked for my input. But I saw the shadow that crossed his face at Tui's name, the flicker of pain he couldn't quite hide.

We were all such messes, weren't we? All of us stumbling around with our bruised hearts and our bad patterns and our desperate hope that things could somehow be different.

"I understand, P'Est. Really."

"I don't want it to be awkward," I continued. "You spend a lot of time with the guys. I spend a lot of time with the guys. We're going to see each other. I just... I want us to be okay."

"It's not awkward," Lego said, and something in his voice suggested he was deciding to make it true as he said it. "We're okay, P'Est. Really. And..." He paused, considering. "Thank you. For coming here. For saying all this. Most people wouldn't."

"I meant it," I said. "Every word."

"I know." His smile reached his eyes this time—tired, but genuine. "That's why I'm saying thank you."

He gestured around the shop, the movement encompassing the buckets and shelves and the riot of color surrounding us. "So," he said, his voice shifting to something lighter, "did you actually want flowers? Or was that just the excuse to come in?"

"Both," I admitted. "Definitely both."

I looked around the shop with fresh eyes, taking in the options that surrounded me. Roses in every shade imaginable. Orchids that looked too delicate to survive outside a greenhouse. Lilies overwhelming the air with their perfume. Cheerful gerberas and elegant calla lilies and tropical blooms I couldn't name.

"My apartment feels dead," I said, trying to articulate what I wanted. "Sterile. I cleaned it out a few weeks ago—got rid of a lot of stuff, tried to make it feel less like a shrine to my own bad decisions. But now it just feels empty. Like nobody lives there."

I thought about the bare surfaces, the minimal decorations, the way sound echoed slightly in the rooms because there wasn't enough soft material to absorb it.

"I need something that will survive," I continued. "Something resilient. Something that..." I trailed off, searching for words. "Something that comes back even after you think it's dead."

Lego nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. "I know exactly what you need." he said.

He moved out from behind the counter, his boots thumping softly against the tile floor. I followed him with my eyes as he bypassed the showy flowers—the roses with their velvet petals, the exotic imports with their price tags to match. He walked past the cooler with its carefully arranged bouquets and the display of cheerful spring arrangements.

He went to a shelf near the back, where the aesthetic shifted. Here the colors were muted—greens and silvers and browns. Dried arrangements hung from hooks. Potted succulents clustered on the shelves, their fleshy leaves requiring minimal care. This was the section for people who wanted living things but couldn't commit to the maintenance of delicate flowers.

Lego gathered stems with practiced hands, building something as he moved. Eucalyptus first—long branches with silvery-green leaves, their medicinal scent sharp and clean. Statice, with its papery purple flowers that would last for months without water. Some kind of dried grass that added texture and movement.

And then he reached for something I didn't recognize. It was in a basket on the bottom shelf—a collection of brown, woody things curled in on themselves like fists. They looked dead. That was my first impression. Completely, thoroughly dead. Brown and brittle and dessicated, twisted into tight spirals that suggested they'd given up on life entirely.

Lego selected several of them, handling them with unexpected gentleness for things that appeared to be beyond any kind of care. He brought everything to the counter and began to arrange them, his movements as precise and intentional as they'd been with the sunflowers. Brown paper. Twine. The particular wrapping technique that transformed a collection of stems into a cohesive gift.

"Resurrection bush," he said, tapping the dead-looking twigs. "Selaginella lepidophylla. Also called the Rose of Jericho. It's a desert plant."

I leaned closer, examining the brown curled forms. They looked like something you'd find at the bottom of a neglected garden pot. Like something that had been left out in the sun for years and forgotten.

"It looks dead when it's dry," Lego continued, his hands still working on the arrangement. "Completely lifeless. The leaves curl in, the whole plant turns brown, it looks like there's nothing left to save. You can leave it in a box for years—literally years—and it will stay just like this. Dormant. Waiting." He tied the twine with a neat

bow, securing the bundle.

"But give it water," he said, looking up at me, "and it turns green again. In hours. It unfolds. It opens up. It remembers how to be alive." He held out the bouquet.

It wasn't vibrant. It wasn't showy. It wasn't the kind of arrangement you'd see in a magazine or give to someone on a special occasion. It looked like a collection of things that had survived a drought—which, I supposed, was exactly what it was.

"Sometimes things that look dead aren't actually dead," Lego said quietly. "They're just waiting for the right conditions. Waiting for someone to add water."

I took the bouquet carefully, feeling the weight of it. The eucalyptus smelled sharp and clean, cutting through the heavier floral scents of the shop. The resurrection bush felt brittle under my fingers, its curled leaves scratchy against my skin.

"How much?" I asked.

"The resurrection bush doesn't cost much. People don't usually want things that look dead," Lego said, moving to the register.

I paid, handling the transaction automatically while my mind was still turning over the metaphor. Things that looked dead but weren't. Things that just needed water to remember how to be alive. "Thanks, Lego," I said, tucking the bouquet carefully against my chest. "For the flowers. And for... everything else."

"Take care, P'Est," he said. His expression was warmer now, the wariness mostly gone.

The bell chimed as I pushed open the door, its cheerful sound following me out into the evening.

The street felt different now.

The sun had finished its descent while I'd been in the shop, and the city had shifted into its nighttime mode. Street vendors were setting up their evening carts, the smell of grilling meat and frying noodles beginning to compete with the exhaust. The neon signs were flickering on, adding their artificial colors to the deepening blue of the sky. Motorcycles wove between cars, their headlights cutting through the dusk. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment, the strange bouquet clutched against my chest, and let the evening air wash over me. It was warm and humid, carrying the particular smell of Bangkok at night—food and exhaust and the distant sweetness of flowering trees, the accumulated scent of millions of people living their lives in close proximity.

The bus stop was still there, just across the street. I could see people waiting—checking their phones, shifting their weight, existing in that particular limbo of public transit. The 514 would come eventually, and I could squeeze onto it with my

flowers, make my way home through the stop-and-start of evening traffic. But when I checked the schedule and saw the next bus was twelve minutes away, I made a different choice.

I started walking. I wanted to move. Wanted to feel the pavement under my feet and the humid air on my skin and the particular rhythm of walking through a city at night. Wanted time to process everything that had happened today—the therapy session that had surprised me with its direction, the meeting at the office, the intense conversation at Ink & Ashes, and now this. The flower shop. Lego. The resurrection bush in my hands.

I walked west, toward my apartment, but I took the long way. Through the side streets where the evening markets were setting up. Past the temple with its golden spires catching the last light. Along the canal where the water reflected the city's glow back at the sky.

I thought about dead things coming back to life.

About William, in his apartment across the city, fighting his daily battles. Taking out the trash—I'd wanted so badly to be let in. To be the one who understood him, who saw him, who got to witness the art being created. I'd convinced myself that if I could just get close enough, I would find something there—love, connection, the answer to the loneliness that had followed me my entire life. But I'd been wrong about what I was looking for. And I'd been wrong about where to find it.

Dr. Siriporn had helped me start to see that. The things I wanted from William—the validation, the sense of being chosen, the proof that I was worthy of love—those weren't things another person could give me. Not really. Not in the way I needed. Those were things I had to find within myself, had to build from the ground up like constructing a house with no blueprint.

It was terrifying work. And I was only just beginning.

I thought about Lego, standing in his shop with his tired eyes and his capable hands. About the way he'd flinched when I mentioned William hurting him. About the sleeve pulled down over his wrist, hiding whatever marks might be there—physical or emotional, visible or not.

He carried so much. William's mental health. His own heartbreak over Tui. The daily work of running a shop, of making things beautiful for strangers who would never know how much effort went into each arrangement. He was nineteen years old—barely an adult—and he was already familiar with the weight of other people's hearts.

I thought about Tui, back at the studio, probably still sitting with his cold coffee and his complicated feelings. The conversation I'd had with him—about fear, about patterns, about the way trauma shaped the choices we made without our conscious

consent. He was fighting his own ghosts, trying to learn that love didn't have to mean destruction, that caring for someone didn't guarantee hurting them.

I thought about Hong, storming out with his silver hair catching the light. His frustration, born from caring too much about people who couldn't stop making mistakes. His sharp words that were really just worried words wearing a costume.

And I thought about myself. Cleaning my apartment. Going to therapy. Taking a new job. Trying to scrub the shame off my skin and start over, to become someone I could respect when I looked in the mirror.

Maybe we were all just resurrection bushes, I thought, turning onto the street that led to my building. Curled in on ourselves. Brown and brittle and looking for all the world like we were finished, like there was nothing left to save. Just waiting. Dormant. Hoping someone would add water. Or maybe that wasn't quite right. Maybe we were the ones who had to add the water ourselves. Maybe nobody else could do it for us—not parents, not lovers, not friends. Maybe the resurrection was our own responsibility, our own work, our own daily choice to unfurl a little more.

I didn't know. I was still figuring it out. But for the first time in a long time, the not-knowing didn't feel like failure. It felt like possibility.

The elevator in my building was slow, as always. I stood in its creaking interior, watching the floor numbers climb, the resurrection bush still clutched against my chest. The eucalyptus scent was stronger now in the enclosed space, sharp and medicinal, clearing my sinuses and my head simultaneously.

My apartment was quiet when I let myself in.

Quiet and still and empty in that particular way that had bothered me when I'd first arrived, that still bothered me sometimes when I came home late and there was no one waiting. No warmth to greet me. No evidence that I'd been missed.

But tonight the emptiness felt different. Not oppressive. Not tragic. Just... potential. Space waiting to be filled. A canvas that hadn't been painted yet, a story that hadn't been written.

I set down my camera bag by the door, hung my keys on the hook I'd installed during my cleaning spree, and carried the flowers to the kitchen.

The vase was where I'd left it—a simple glass cylinder I'd found in one of the cupboards, probably left by a previous tenant. I'd cleaned it earlier in the week, part of my ongoing campaign to organize every corner of my life into something that made sense. Now I filled it with cool water from the tap, watching the liquid rise, catching the light from the overhead fixture.

I unwrapped the bouquet carefully. The brown paper crinkled as I opened it,

releasing another wave of eucalyptus scent. The stems inside were arranged with obvious intention—Lego's work evident in the way they balanced against each other.

The eucalyptus went in first, its silvery branches creating a framework of shape and movement. The statice followed, its purple clusters adding color that would last for months. The dried grass added texture, softening the composition.

And the resurrection bush.

I held one of the dried specimens in my hand, turning it slowly. It really did look dead. Completely, irredeemably dead. The leaves were curled so tightly that the whole thing had formed a ball, brown and brittle, with no hint of the green that supposedly lived inside.

It was hard to believe anything could come back from this. Hard to believe that somewhere inside this dry husk, there was life waiting to be awakened.

But Lego had said it was true. And I wanted to believe him.

I placed the resurrection bush stems in the water, making sure they were fully submerged. Then I carried the vase to my desk—the same desk where I edited photos, where I'd sat for hours poring over images of William trying to understand something that couldn't be understood. The desk looked different now. Cleaner. The obsessive collection of William-related materials was gone, deleted or filed away in digital boxes I didn't intend to open.

I positioned the vase where I'd see it every time I sat down to work. The resurrection bush floated slightly in the water, its dried leaves beginning to absorb the moisture. Then I pulled up a chair and sat down.

Watching. Waiting.

It wouldn't happen instantly. I knew that. Healing wasn't magic, wasn't a switch you could flip. It was biology. It was time. It was the slow, invisible uptake of what was needed to survive. Lego had said hours. Hours for something that looked completely dead to remember how to be alive.

I could wait hours.

I could wait longer than that, if necessary.

The first change was so subtle I almost missed it.

It had been about two hours. I'd showered, changed into comfortable clothes, put on some ambient music that filled the silence without demanding attention. I'd reviewed my schedule for the coming week—shooting days and meetings and my next therapy appointment marked in different colors on my calendar. I'd sat back

down at the desk, checking emails, when something caught my eye.

The resurrection bush.

One of the outer leaves—if you could call them leaves—had moved. Not much. Just a slight uncurling, a millimeter of brown becoming visible where before there had only been the tight spiral of dormancy. But it was movement. Change. Life.

I leaned closer, watching. Another leaf shifted. Then another. The dried form was beginning to loosen, to relax, to remember a shape it had held before the drought came.

I sat there, barely breathing, watching a dead thing come back to life.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't magical in the storybook sense. It was just biology—water entering desiccated cells, proteins reactivating, the machinery of life slowly grinding back into motion. But it was also, in its quiet way, miraculous.

This plant had waited. Had curled in on itself and let everything dry up and stopped trying to be green. Had accepted the dormancy, the apparent death, the long brown waiting.

And now, with just a little water, it was remembering how to live.

I thought about my father's cold hands. My mother's conditional love. All the years I'd spent curled in on myself, protecting whatever green was left inside me from a world that seemed determined to dry it out.

I thought about William, and the obsession that had consumed me. The way I'd twisted myself into knots trying to be whatever he might want, trying to earn a love that was never going to be available. That relationship had been a drought of its own—a long dry season of wanting and not receiving, reaching and not connecting.

But I'd survived it. I was surviving it. And maybe, like the resurrection bush, I just needed to add water. Therapy was water. The new job was water. The connections I was rebuilding—with Hong, with Tui, with the studio, with the world—those were water too. I watched another leaf unfurl, a hint of green becoming visible at its base. Maybe resurrection wasn't a single moment. Maybe it was this—the slow accumulation of tiny changes. The gradual uncurling. The patient work of becoming alive again, one cell at a time.